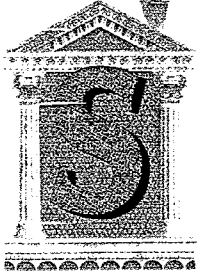


The Fall of the Roman Empire 16



Strengths and Weaknesses The Roman Empire accomplished a lot for the people who lived within its boundaries. The Romans brought their own brand of law and order to the lands around the Mediterranean Sea. They built roads, originally to move the army from one area to the next, but these roads were also used for trade and travel.

The Romans built cities throughout their empire, and they improved the quality of food and water available in most places. Good government and laws protected the rights of Roman citizens and gave people the opportunity to seek justice for wrongs. The Roman Empire brought peace and prosperity that lasted for centuries.

By the third century, however, the empire was struggling with serious problems. For a long time, Romans were prosperous because the empire was continually growing. New people, lands, and trade possibilities were always being added to the empire. The army brought back plunder and added new sources of tax money. But by the third century, the empire wasn't growing any longer.

The empire began to show signs of weakness. Some of these were economic. By the year 200 there was a significant **recession**. This meant that there were fewer jobs and fewer goods available. Recessions are often accompanied by periods of **inflation**, and that is what happened in the Roman Empire. During a time of inflation, money is available but not worth much, so prices rise. People have to pay more and more for the things they want to buy.

The emperors tried to address the problems that came with recession and inflation.


vocabulary
recession a time when trade and business fall off
inflation a process that makes money more widely available and therefore less valuable

The emperor Diocletian (dye uh KLEE shun) (245–316) thought that he could stop prices from rising by declaring what the prices should be. This did not improve matters. The only thing that happened was that some goods became completely unavailable.

The emperor Constantine (274–337) thought that the problem with high prices was that more money was needed. He put the gold from the pagan temples into circulation, but this did not help either. Inflation did not stop, and other problems developed. Recession and inflation combined to cause joblessness. With joblessness came poverty, and with poverty, crime and disease. Some Roman leaders tried giving money and bread away, but these were short-term fixes to problems that were large and complicated.

There was a widening gulf between rich and poor. Aristocrats, such as senators, were five times richer than they had been in the Age of Augustus. And there were fewer and fewer opportunities for people to improve their future. The Roman army had been one place where many men had gotten wealth, land, and social position. However, the army was no longer conquering new territories. In fact, it was no longer even successful at holding on to lands that had been conquered many years before.

Government was also suffering serious problems. Powerful generals and the army legions loyal to them battled for power. General murdered general. It seemed as if civil war had become a way of life. Officials became increasingly corrupt and did not do their jobs properly.



Some emperors were good and wise, but others were totally unsuited to ruling. For example, Nero was probably insane. He had his mother stabbed to death and his first wife executed. Then he kicked his pregnant second wife to death. He may have set fire to the city of Rome—a crime that he blamed on Christians, whom he put to death cruelly. At last the army forced him to commit suicide. Before he died, Nero supposedly said, “Death! And so great an artist.” Other emperors poisoned their enemies, drank heavily, and neglected the affairs of the empire. Between 180 and 270 there were 80 emperors—almost one a year—and many of these were worthless as rulers.

People wondered if there was any justice in the world. It seemed that greed and corruption were everywhere in the empire. They began to wonder if there was anything worth believing in.

During this time the number of Christians continued to grow. It seemed that Christianity offered something that many in the empire were looking for. Some were drawn to Christianity because it preached peace, patience, and kindness toward others in a time of violence. Others were drawn to Christianity because it gave opportunities for talented men to become leaders without having to kill to gain power. Talented, educated men were needed to lead the church, and church leaders did not lead by force and violence. During the third century, Christians were still not considered loyal citizens of the empire, and they still faced persecution. After the Edict of Milan in 313, however, they could be found throughout society.

The troubles of the third and fourth centuries were so serious that it seemed as if the empire would collapse. But the problems inside the empire were only part of the story.

The Germanic Tribes

For the Romans the center of the world was Rome, and Rome was part of the Mediterranean world. Their attention was drawn to the lands and peoples that surrounded the Mediterranean Sea. Once Rome had conquered all of these, their generals looked for other ways to expand the empire. Men like Julius Caesar fought wars in

Europe to bring the peoples of the North under Roman control. Caesar and a few other Romans went as far as Britain and established bases there.

The peoples of northern Europe, however, were not like the peoples of the Mediterranean with whom the Romans were familiar. The Romans referred to the northern Europeans as barbarians. Unlike the peoples of the Mediterranean, many of the peoples of Europe did not live settled lives in villages. They wandered from place to place, looking for food. They had not built great civilizations with which the Romans could trade. They had no fabulous cities and no poetry or art of interest to the Romans.

Goths and Vandals

One significant group of northern people included Germanic tribes, such as the Goths and the Vandals. For several centuries these tribes bothered the Romans by attacking Roman soldiers and trying to invade the empire. Most of these battles were small and not well organized. Such attacks were not really a threat to the empire when it was strong, but now the empire had its own problems and was not as strong as it had been. The Germanic tribes began to be successful when they attacked Roman troops.

Many of the so-called barbarians were fierce fighters. The Romans admired this, and they included these warriors in the army legions that patrolled the borders of the empire. After a time, the Roman army that patrolled the northern borders of the empire was mostly made up of warriors from Germanic tribes. They fought off the attacks of other Germanic tribes. At least they were supposed to.

In 410 the Visigothic king Alaric (AL uh rihk) and his army attacked Rome, overcoming its defenses and plundering it. The Roman leaders in the eastern part of the empire were shocked that the western Roman leaders had let it come to this. The western part of the empire was in chaos. In 476 the last Roman emperor in the west, Romulus Augustulus, was overthrown by Odoacer (oh doh AY sur), a Germanic warrior who became the first barbarian king of Italy. He ruled until 493, when he was overthrown

by Theodoric (thee AHD uh rihk), king of the Ostrogoths. At this point, Roman rule no longer existed in Europe and the western part of the Mediterranean.

The Rise of Islam

Roman rule still existed in the East, which had long been the wealthier and more important part of the empire. Increasingly, it was also called the **Byzantine** (BIHZ un teen) **Empire**. There

vocabulary
Byzantine Empire
the name of the
Eastern Roman Empire
from about A.D. 330
until its end in 1453

was an emperor in the great city of Constantinople, which Emperor Constantine had founded as the "New Rome."

(Today, this city is called Istanbul and is in Turkey.) The Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire ruled modern Greece, Turkey, and at different times, parts of the Middle East.

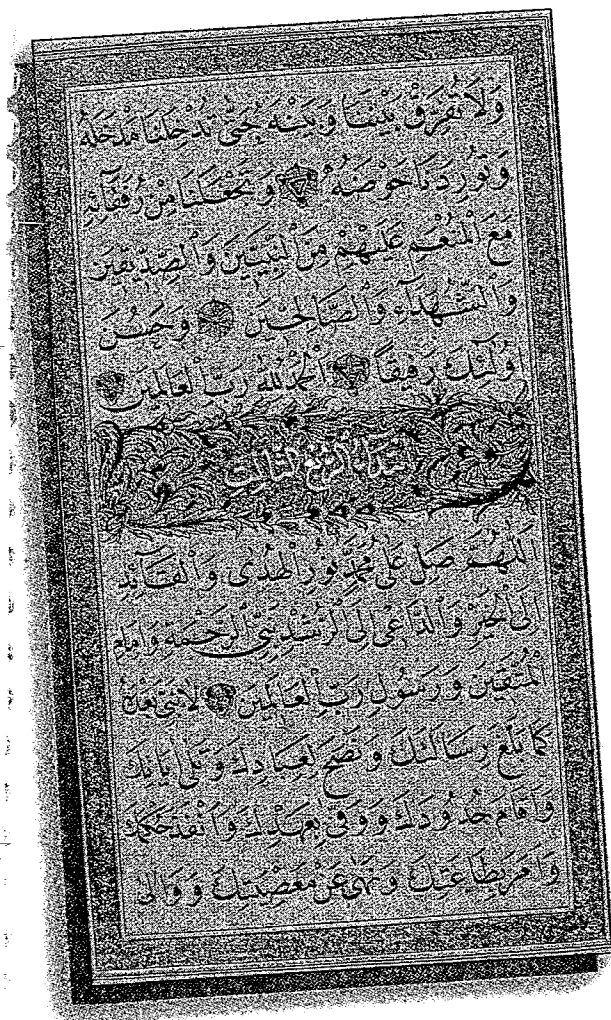
In 610 a man named Muhammad, who lived in Arabia, began to see visions. He was regarded as a holy prophet by many and soon became the leader of a new religion: Islam. For the Arabs, who had long been fighting one another, Muhammad was a great leader. He united them and gave them a sense of purpose. They became followers of **Allah** and students of a holy book called the **Koran**.

Islam proved to be a strong religion. Within several years the Arabs had joined together as Muslims. Anyone who was not a Muslim was classified as an unbeliever, and many Muslims felt that it was lawful to make war on unbelievers.

vocabulary
Allah the name of
God used by followers
of the religion Islam
Koran the holy
scripture of Islam,
which Muslims believe
was written by God
(Allah) and dictated to
Muhammad; also
spelled Qur'an

The Arab armies began to attack the Byzantine Empire from the South. The city of Antioch in Syria fell in 637. Alexandria in Egypt fell in 642. In the early 700s the Muslim armies conquered Spain. An attempt to invade Gaul (France) was stopped by a Christian army in 732. If it had succeeded, Muslim armies would probably have conquered Europe, and virtually everyone there would have become Muslim.

The Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantine Empire, with its capital in Constantinople, remained standing. It would last for almost a thousand years, although it was attacked a number of times. Finally, in 1453, Constantinople was conquered and the emperor was killed. The Byzantine Empire, which had always considered itself an extension of the Roman Empire, had fallen at last.



This is a page of prayer from a nineteenth-century Koran. It was made in Damascus, Syria.

The Grandeur That Was Rome

The decline and fall of Rome was a long, slow process. It had many causes, and there was no single moment, event, or decision that could have stopped it. Problems within the empire and challenges from outside combined to bring the empire in the West to an end. Yet even when there was no longer a Roman emperor in Rome, people still thought in terms of the empire. Christian leaders took on many of the duties of Roman officials. They divided the church along the same lines as the empire in the west had been divided. Over the centuries the Roman official called a *vicarius* became a church vicar, a minister or priest in charge of a church. A diocese, originally an area for Roman administration, became an area of church administration. Church leaders continued to wear the same clothing—*vestitus*—that Roman officials had worn. Today, these

items are referred to as vestments, the garments worn for religious rituals.

The prestige of the old Roman Empire was so strong that in 800, a king of the Franks named Charlemagne was named Holy Roman Emperor. Although his “empire” was really much of western Europe and did not even include all of Italy, he was the strongest ruler around and therefore, in the minds of many people, the man who should be the new emperor.

European kings after Charlemagne based their laws on Roman laws. European universities made sure their students read Roman histories and Roman poets, like Virgil. In later centuries, Rome was rediscovered as a center for art, culture, and learning. Although the empire ended, its power and influence continued to live on.

Charlemagne was crowned emperor in A.D. 800 by Pope Leo III.

